

THE BEAUTIFUL UPSET: A SERIES ON MARK DAILY STUDY

INTRODUCTION

We're starting in the middle of Mark's Gospel, which, I admit, seems a little odd, but it is intentional. By the time we reach Mark 8, Jesus has been teaching, healing, and confusing people for months. The crowds have been following Him, the religious leaders have been questioning Him, and His disciples have been trying to figure out who He really is.

It's at this point that Jesus stops being evasive about His identity and starts being really clear about His mission. And it's not at all what anyone expected.

We're to go walk the journey to the cross through the eyes of people who thought they knew what a Messiah should look like. People who had clear expectations about how God should work in the world. People who, frankly, sound a lot like us.

"The Journey to the Cross" isn't just about what happened to Jesus two thousand years ago. It's about what happens to us when the God we think we understand turns out to be completely different from what we expected. It's about following a King whose crown is made of thorns, whose throne is a cross, and whose victory looks awfully like defeat.

Mark doesn't give us a comfortable Jesus. He gives us an unexpected King who challenges everything we think we know about power, success, and what it means to win. This journey will take us through confession and confusion, glory and struggle, greatness redefined and expectations shattered.

Over these six weeks leading to Easter, we'll discover that the cross isn't just the destination of Jesus' journey, it's the revelation of who He's been all along. The beautiful upset of a King who conquers by surrendering, and who saves the world by losing everything.

Are you ready to have your expectations challenged? Are you ready to follow a King who doesn't fit the mold? Are you ready for the journey to the cross?

—Pastor Andreas and the Teaching Team for Crosswalk Church

WEEK 1 - MONDAY

THE QUESTION THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Mark 8:27-30 (NLT) *"Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages near Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?' 'Well,' they replied, 'some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.' Then he asked them, 'But who do you say I am?' Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah.' Then Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him."*

"Who do you say I am?" It's the most important question Jesus ever asked, and it's the question that drives everything that follows in Mark's Gospel. The question moves from collective speculation to personal declaration, from distant observation to intimate recognition. After months of teaching and healing, after feeding thousands and walking on water, Jesus finally asks the question that matters most.

Notice that Jesus doesn't start with "Who am I?" He starts with "Who do people say I am?" The crowds have opinions. They've got theories. Some think He's John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others see Elijah returned. Still others figure He's just another prophet in a long line of prophets.

All of these are impressive options. All of them acknowledge that something special is happening. But all of them keep Jesus safely in the category of "really good human being." Prophet, teacher, miracle worker, these are roles people can understand and manage. But then Jesus makes it personal: "Who do you say I am?" Not the crowds. Not the religious experts. Not the people who've heard the stories secondhand. You. The people who've been walking with me, eating with me, watching me heal the sick and calm the storms. Who do you say I am?

Peter, bless him, gets it right: "You are the Messiah." The Christ. The Anointed One. The King we've been waiting for. It's the right answer to the right question, and you can almost hear the relief in Peter's voice. Finally, we can say it out loud. Finally, we can acknowledge what we've been thinking. But instead of celebration, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. Instead of confirmation, we get confusion. Because Peter's right answer is about to collide with Jesus' unexpected definition of what being the Messiah actually means.

The question "Who do you say I am?" isn't just about getting the right theological answer. It's about being willing to follow wherever that answer leads, even when it doesn't match our expectations.

1. **If Jesus asked you personally, "Who do you say I am?" How would you answer?**
2. **What expectations do you have about how Jesus should work in your life?**
3. **How do you respond when Jesus doesn't fit the mold you've created for Him?**

WEEK 1 - TUESDAY

THE MESSIAH WE DIDN'T EXPECT

Mark 8:31-33 (NLT) *"Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. As he talked about this openly, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. But Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. 'Get away from me, Satan!' he said. 'You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's perspective.'"*

The conversation takes a sharp turn. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Messiah, and instead of a celebration, Jesus immediately starts talking about suffering, rejection, and death. This is not what anyone signed up for.

"Must suffer." Jesus doesn't say He might suffer or that suffering is one possible path among many. He says He must suffer. It's not an unfortunate detour from His mission, it's the very heart of His mission. The road to the throne goes through the cross. Peter's reaction is completely understandable. He's just confessed Jesus as the promised King, and now Jesus is talking about being killed. In Peter's mind, Messiahs don't die, they conquer. They don't suffer, they reign. They don't get rejected, they get crowned.

So Peter does what any good friend would do: he takes Jesus aside and tries to talk some sense into Him. "Jesus, this is crazy talk. You're the Messiah. You're supposed to overthrow the Romans, not get killed by them. You're supposed to establish the kingdom, not die on a cross."

But Jesus' response is shocking: "Get away from me, Satan!" These are some of the harshest words Jesus ever spoke to a disciple. Why such a strong reaction to what seems like a caring friend trying to protect Him?

Because Peter's perspective represents the fundamental temptation Jesus faced throughout His ministry: the temptation to be the Messiah people wanted instead of the Messiah the world needed. The temptation to choose an easier path, a more popular approach, a crown without a cross. Jesus calls it "seeing things merely from a human point of view." From a human perspective, power comes through dominance, victory through violence, and success through self-preservation. But God's perspective is radically different. In God's kingdom, power comes through service, victory through sacrifice, and success through surrender.

1. Where do you find yourself wanting Jesus to work in more "human" ways in your life?
2. How do you respond when God's methods don't match your expectations?
3. What would it look like to embrace "God's perspective" on a current challenge you're facing?

WEEK 1 - WEDNESDAY

THE COST OF FOLLOWING

Mark 8:34-38 (NLT) *"Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in this adulterous and sinful generation, I will be ashamed of that person when the Son of Man returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'"*

Jesus doesn't just redefine what it means to be the Messiah, He redefines what it means to follow the Messiah. If the King takes up a cross, then His followers will too. If the path to life goes through death, then that's the path for everyone who wants to walk with Him.

"Give up your own way." This is the first requirement of discipleship, and it's the hardest one. We all have our own way, our own plans, our own priorities, our own ideas about how life should go. Following Jesus means surrendering the right to be the director of our own story.

"Take up your cross." In Jesus' day, everyone knew what a cross meant. It meant execution. It meant the end of your agenda and the beginning of Rome's judgment. When Jesus says "take up your cross," He's not talking about minor inconveniences or difficult circumstances. He's talking about dying to self-will.

But here's the paradox that runs through all of Jesus' teaching: the way to find your life is to lose it. The way to save yourself is to give yourself away. The way to experience true fulfillment is to stop making fulfillment your primary goal. This isn't masochism or a death wish. This is the recognition that the life we're trying so hard to preserve and protect is actually too small for us. We were made for something bigger than our own comfort, our own success, our own happiness. We were made for the kingdom of God.

"What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" Jesus is asking the ultimate cost-benefit question. What's the point of having everything you think you want if you lose who you were created to be? What's the point of winning at life if you miss the point of life? The path Jesus offers isn't easier than the alternatives, it's better. It's the difference between a life spent protecting yourself and a life spent investing yourself in something that matters forever.

1. What aspects of "your own way" is Jesus asking you to surrender?
2. Where are you trying to hang on to control instead of taking up your cross?
3. How might losing your life for Jesus' sake actually help you find it?

WEEK 1 - THURSDAY

THE UNEXPECTED ANSWER

Mark 8:27-29 (NLT) *"Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages near Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, 'Who do people say I am?' 'Well,' they replied, 'some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.' Then he asked them, 'But who do you say I am?' Peter replied, 'You are the Messiah.'"*

Let's sit with Peter's answer for a moment: "You are the Messiah." Three words that marked a rubicon. Not "You're a good teacher" or "You're an inspiring leader" or even "You're a powerful prophet." You are the Messiah. The one we've been waiting for. The one all of history has been pointing toward.

But here's what we need to understand: Peter's right answer was still an incomplete answer. Peter knew Jesus was the Messiah, but he had no idea what kind of Messiah Jesus would be. Peter was thinking throne room; Jesus was thinking cross. Peter was thinking crown; Jesus was thinking crucifixion.

This is one of the most dangerous places we can find ourselves spiritually: having the right answer but the wrong understanding. Saying the correct words but missing the deeper meaning. Confessing Jesus as Lord while expecting Him to be a different kind of Lord than He actually is. The Messiah Peter was expecting would solve problems through power, defeat enemies through violence, and establish the kingdom through political dominance. The Messiah, Jesus actually is, solves problems through sacrifice, defeats enemies through love, and establishes the kingdom through suffering service.

Peter's confession was true, but his expectations were about to be shattered. And maybe that's exactly what needed to happen. Maybe our expectations need to be shattered too. How often do we come to Jesus with the right title but the wrong agenda? We call Him Lord but want Him to be our assistant. We call Him Savior but want Him to save us from discomfort rather than from sin. We call Him King but want Him to rubber-stamp our kingdoms instead of establishing His own.

The beautiful thing about Jesus is that He doesn't reject us because our understanding is incomplete. He doesn't dismiss Peter because Peter's expectations are wrong. He patiently teaches, gradually reveals, and lovingly corrects. But He also doesn't leave us in our misunderstanding. He loves us too much to let us settle for a Jesus who's too small.

1. In what ways might your understanding of who Jesus is still be incomplete?

2. How do you respond when Jesus doesn't meet your expectations of how He should work?
 3. Where might Jesus be inviting you to expand your understanding of who He is?
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WEEK 1 - FRIDAY

THE SILENCE THAT SPEAKS

Mark 8:30 (NLT) "Then Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him."

This is one of the most puzzling verses in the Gospels. Peter just gave the right answer to the most important question ever asked, and Jesus tells him to keep quiet about it. Imagine you're in a classroom. You've been studying for weeks, flash cards, practice problems, late-night cramming. The teacher finally asks the question you've been preparing for. Your hand shoots up. You nail it. Perfect answer. And then the teacher looks at you and says, "Don't tell anyone what you just said." You'd be baffled. Isn't getting the right answer supposed to be celebrated? But that's exactly what Jesus does. Throughout Mark's Gospel, we see this pattern again and again. Jesus heals someone and tells them not to tell anyone. He casts out demons and commands them to be silent. He reveals His identity to the disciples and warns them not to spread the news. Scholars call it the "Messianic Secret," and it reveals something crucial about how Jesus understood His mission.

Jesus wasn't interested in being famous. He was interested in being faithful. He wasn't trying to build a crowd; He was trying to build a kingdom. And He knew that if people heard "Messiah" without understanding what kind of Messiah He was, they would follow Him for all the wrong reasons. If word got out, the crowds would expect Him to start a revolution, overthrow the Romans, and establish an earthly kingdom. They would come looking for a political savior, not a spiritual one. They would want bread and circuses, not death and resurrection.

Jesus needed time to redefine what it meant to be the Messiah before the world heard the news. He needed to demonstrate that His kingdom was not of this world, that His power was not like earthly power, and that His victory would come through apparent defeat. There's wisdom here for us too. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is wait before we speak. Sometimes people need to see our lives before they hear our words. Sometimes the gospel is better demonstrated than declared, better lived than proclaimed.

This doesn't mean we should never talk about our faith, the Great Commission makes it clear that we're called to share the good news. But it does mean we should be thoughtful about timing, context, and preparation. It means we should be more concerned with faithfulness than with publicity. Jesus' silence wasn't about hiding the truth; it was about revealing the truth in the right way at the right time. Sometimes the most powerful witness is a life lived so faithfully that people start asking questions.

1. When might silence be more powerful than speaking when it comes to sharing your faith?
 2. How can you "demonstrate the gospel" before you declare it?
 3. Where is Jesus asking you to be faithful rather than trying to be famous?
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WEEK 2 - MONDAY

THE MOUNTAIN OF GLORY

Mark 9:2–8 (NLT) "Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white... Then Elijah and Moses appeared and began talking with Jesus... a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my dearly loved Son. Listen to him.' Suddenly, when they looked around, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus with them."

Mountaintop moments are rare, but when they come, they change you. I still remember one from when I was sixteen, at a prayer retreat. It was electric. Holy. I felt this overwhelming sense of God's nearness that I still struggle to put into words. And like anyone who's tasted something that good, I wanted to hold onto it. Stay there. Never come back down. Peter, James, and John knew that feeling.

They followed Jesus up a mountain expecting nothing more than another prayer session. But then it happens: they're swallowed in radiance. Jesus, ordinary Jesus, familiar Jesus, dusty-road-with-us Jesus, shines like lightning. It's as if heaven pulls back the curtain and lets them see who He really is. Moses and Elijah appear, the law and the prophets standing together, all of Israel's hopes and God's promises converging in one place, with Jesus at the center. Peter does what we all do when overwhelmed by glory: he tries to contain it. "Let's build shelters!" Translation: Let's freeze this moment. Let's stay here. Let's never go back down. But God interrupts with a declaration that redirects everything: "This is my Son. Listen to Him."

In other words (and it sounds counterintuitive): Don't cling to the moment, cling to Jesus. Don't try to capture the glory, receive the One who is glory. When the cloud lifts, Moses and Elijah are gone. The radiance fades. Only Jesus remains. The moment passes, but the Messiah stays. Because these flashes of glory aren't meant to be bottled. They're meant to prepare us for what comes next.

1. When have you experienced God's presence in a powerful way?
2. What changed once you came "down the mountain"?
3. What does it look like to listen to Jesus in your everyday life?

WEEK 2 - TUESDAY

COMING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN

Mark 9:9–13 (NLT) *“As they went back down the mountain, He told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead... Then they asked Him, ‘Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?’ Jesus responded... ‘Elijah has already come, and they chose to abuse him...’”*

The walk down the mountain is always harder than the climb up. The disciples have just seen Jesus in glory, radiant, unmistakable, divine. But mountain moments aren't permanent residences. They are revelations meant to sustain us through what comes next. Jesus tells them to keep quiet until after the resurrection. Not because He's hiding, but because glory without a cross is a half-truth. A Messiah of miracles but not suffering. A Christ of light but not love demonstrated in sacrifice.

Mountaineers know this truth physically: roughly 80% of climbing accidents happen on the way down, not up. Your legs are already fatigued, you're moving faster, and gravity works against your joints. Ed Viesturs, one of the first Americans to summit all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks, put it bluntly: "Getting to the top is optional. Getting down is mandatory." The summit gives you the high. The descent demands you make it home alive when you're exhausted and the adrenaline has worn off.

And Jesus reminds them: Elijah did come in person of John the Baptist, but instead of welcoming him, they rejected him. Glory and suffering are always woven together in God's story. This is where most of us struggle. We want the God of the mountain without the God of the valley. We want the breakthrough without obedience. We want clarity without the cost.

So, Jesus walks them down the mountain, straight toward a world still full of confusion, pain, and resistance. The mountain reveals who Jesus truly is. The valley reveals what discipleship truly means.

1. How do you feel when a spiritual high gives way to ordinary life?
2. Where do you sense God calling you “down the mountain” right now?
3. How can you carry the clarity of the mountain into the uncertainty of the valley?

WEEK 2 - WEDNESDAY

THE VALLEY OF FAILURE

Mark 9:14–19 (NLT) *“When they returned to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd... Some teachers of religious law were arguing... One man spoke up and said, ‘Teacher, I brought my*

son... but your disciples couldn't cast out the evil spirit.' Jesus said... 'How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.'"

The valley is where our faith feels thin and our weaknesses feel exposed.

While three disciples saw the mountaintop glory, the others were stuck in the valley, failing spectacularly. A desperate father brought them his tormented son, and nothing happened. No healing. No power. Just arguments and accusations. When Jesus arrives, He finds confusion, frustration, and religious leaders circling like vultures. The contrast couldn't be sharper: mountaintop shining Jesus, valley-floor struggling disciples.

We've all been there, high hopes colliding with our own limitations. We've believed for breakthrough, prayed for change, committed to spiritual practices... only to find ourselves powerless.

I remember one night when my daughter was little and my wife wasn't feeling well—nothing serious, just exhausted. My daughter wanted to pray for her mom, so we gathered around. This tiny girl with her eyes squeezed shut, praying with all the faith her little heart could muster. And I'm standing there thinking, "Okay God, this is on You. You've got to come through. Don't let her down." It felt silly and small and fragile all at once. That time, my wife got better. But it doesn't always happen that way. Sometimes we pray and nothing changes. Sometimes our faith feels smaller, not stronger.

The valley forces us to face the parts of our faith that are fragile, confused, or shallow. But here's the good news: Jesus meets us in the valley. He doesn't wait for us to climb back up; He brings His power right into our failure. The disciples couldn't cast out the demon, but Jesus can. And then He tells them why they failed: "This kind can only come out by prayer." They wanted a technique. Jesus gave them dependence. They wanted a method they could master. Jesus pointed them to a relationship they must rely on. The valley doesn't just expose our weakness, it reveals what kind of Messiah we actually need. Not one who gives us power to fix things ourselves, but one who meets us in our powerlessness and does what only He can do.

1. **When have you felt powerless in your faith?**
2. **What do you tend to do when your spiritual confidence collapses?**
3. **Where might Jesus be inviting you to bring your weakness to Him honestly?**

WEEK 2 - THURSDAY

HELP MY UNBELIEF!

Mark 9:20–24 (NLT) "The father instantly cried out, 'I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!'"

There may be no prayer more honest, or more relatable, in the entire Bible. The boy's father is exhausted. Years of watching his son suffer. Years of disappointment. Years of praying without answers. His faith isn't polished; it's patched together from hope and heartbreak. When Jesus tells him that healing comes through belief, the father doesn't pretend or fake confidence. Instead he prays the truest prayer a human can pray: "I believe—help my unbelief."

I grew up in church, and I remember one Sunday timing a prayer before the sermon. Eight minutes. Eight full minutes of eloquent, Shakespearean English, thee's and thou's, cascading theological explanations, carefully constructed clauses. Now, I have no problem with longer prayers. I spend extended time with God. But, somewhere along the line we've been taught to believe and act like God only hears us when we speak in King James vocabulary with dissertations on theology. Like prayer is a performance that requires the right words, the right length, the right tone.

But here's this father. His prayer is six words: "I believe, help my unbelief." That's it. No flowery language. No theological precision. Just raw, honest desperation laid bare before Jesus. This is the kind of faith Jesus honors: not performance, but honesty; not certainty, but surrender; not strength, but truthfulness before God.

"Faith isn't the absence of doubt," Frederick Buechner once wrote, "but the courage to go on in spite of it." And that's exactly what we see in this father. Faith isn't the absence of doubt, it's bringing those doubts directly to Jesus. Faith isn't having life neatly organized, it's trusting the One who holds all things together. Faith isn't pretending, it's confessing. The father's prayer gives us permission to stop filtering our souls before God. If the measure of faith were perfection, none of us could follow Jesus. But the measure of faith has always been trust, even if it trembles, even if it's partial, even if it's mixed with fear.

1. **Where do you need to pray, "Help my unbelief"?**
 2. **What doubts or fears have you been hiding instead of bringing to Jesus?**
 3. **How might honesty with God deepen your faith rather than weaken it?**
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WEEK 2 - FRIDAY

PRAYER AND POWER

Mark 9:25–29 (NLT) "Afterward, when Jesus was alone in the house with His disciples, they asked Him, 'Why couldn't we cast out that evil spirit?' Jesus replied, 'This kind can be cast out only by prayer.'"

The week my daughter turned two, she became a tiny tornado. The terrible twos didn't ease in, they slammed into our home like a storm front. I remember turning to my wife and saying, "I thought this was supposed to be gradual."

So, I did what anxious parents do: I gathered techniques. Books, podcasts, workshops, five steps to raising responsible kids, one phrase that ends tantrums. I treated parenting like a problem to solve. But none of those scripts helped much when she melted down in the grocery store or battled bedtime for the third night in a row. In those moments, I wasn't actually present with her, I was scrambling for the next method. I wanted a technique I could master.

What she needed was a father who would sit in the chaos. Someone who didn't have all the answers but wouldn't leave the room. The shortcut was believing I could engineer connection

through the right strategies. The truth was that relationship required presence – showing up, staying with her, even when I felt powerless.

That's exactly what Jesus means when He says, "This kind comes out only by prayer." He isn't offering a technique. He's calling us to dependence. Prayer isn't about mastering a method; it's about staying connected to the Father when the situation feels beyond us. We often feel powerless because we live prayerless, not prayerless as in "never praying," but prayerless as in treating prayer as supplemental instead of foundational. Prayer isn't the power; God is. Prayer is the posture that opens us to His presence, the way we stay in the room with Him rather than rushing for the next shortcut.

1. How would you describe your prayer life right now?
 2. Where do you feel spiritually powerless—and how might prayer reshape that?
 3. What simple step could you take today to deepen your dependence on God
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WEEK 3 - MONDAY

WALKING TOWARD DEATH

Mark 10:32–34 (NLT) *"They were now on the way up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with awe, and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him..."*

If you slow down long enough to picture this scene, one detail refuses to stay quiet: Jesus is walking ahead of them, he's not drifting behind, not hesitating, not scanning the horizon for an easier route. He is out front, leading the way toward Jerusalem with the steady, deliberate pace of someone who knows exactly what awaits Him and still chooses to keep moving. The disciples are caught between awe and dread, and the crowd trailing behind them feels the fear rising like heat off the road. Everyone knows Jerusalem is dangerous. Everyone can sense the growing hostility. And Jesus responds not by avoiding the city, but by naming, plainly, the betrayal, mockery, torture, and death that lie ahead.

This is not accidental martyrdom. This is not naïve optimism. This is love with its eyes wide open. Jesus does not stumble into sacrifice. He walks toward it.

And when you see someone choose the harder path with that kind of clarity, it arrests you. It reminds you that courageous love is not an ancient idea, it still takes human skin. In 1939, as the Warsaw Ghetto formed under Nazi control, a young social worker named Irena Sendler recognized exactly what was happening. She understood the cruelty of the regime. She saw where the trains led. And rather than retreat, she stepped toward the suffering. She joined the Polish underground and began smuggling Jewish children out of the ghetto, infants hidden in toolboxes, older children disguised as patients, names carefully written and buried in jars under an apple tree so families could be reunited after the war. By 1945, she had rescued over 2,500 children (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; *Life in a Jar*).

Eventually the Gestapo caught her. They beat her, and demanded the names of the children. She refused to give up a single one. Irena didn't run into danger because she lacked fear. She ran into danger because love demanded courage. Jesus walks ahead of His disciples that way, not numb to suffering, but committed to a mission that cannot be accomplished from a safe distance. And Mark subtly asks us: If Jesus is walking ahead toward costly obedience, where are you standing?

1. **What difficult path might Jesus be asking you to face with courage?**
 2. **Where do you find yourself hesitating to follow Him?**
 3. **How does Jesus' intentionality challenge the way you make hard decisions?**
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WEEK 3 - TUESDAY

THE REQUEST

Mark 10:35–37 (NLT) *“Then James and John... said, ‘Teacher, we want you to do us a favor... When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you.’”*

A friend once told me a story about one of those moments where a person says something perfectly reasonable at a *spectacularly* unreasonable time. His extended family had gathered at the hospital after their grandmother suffered a major stroke. It was one of those hushed, holy moments, siblings holding hands, tears in the corners of eyes, doctors stepping in and out of the room. They'd just finished praying over her when, out of nowhere, a cousin cleared his throat and said, “Hey... while everybody's here... can we talk about who's taking Grandma's dining table when she passes?”

He wasn't trying to be cruel. He was just astonishingly out of sync with the moment. A whole room full of people processing grief, and he's thinking about furniture.

My friend said you could feel every head swivel in unison. Good request. Horrendous timing. And that is *precisely* the energy in this moment with James and John. Jesus has just told the disciples, in painful, vulnerable detail, what's waiting for Him in Jerusalem. Betrayal. Mockery. Abuse. Execution. He's opening His heart, letting them see the weight He is carrying. And James and John respond with: “So... could we sit in the top two seats when you're king?” They're not trying to be disrespectful. They're just out of sync. They hear “suffering” and think “status.” They hear “cross” and think “crowns.” They hear “Jerusalem” and imagine a throne room, not a hill shaped like a skull.

But before we judge them, we should recognize the reflection staring back at us. Because many of us follow Jesus with a quiet assumption, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, that discipleship should come with perks: clarity, opportunity, recognition, success. We want Jesus, but we also want the benefits package. James and John remind us that you can walk closely with Jesus and still completely misunderstand what greatness looks like in His kingdom. Jesus doesn't rebuke their desire, He reframes it. Greatness isn't proximity to power. Greatness is proximity to surrender. It's service hidden from applause, sacrifice that no one tweets about, love that goes unnoticed except by God. James and John want reserved seats. Jesus invites

them into a different kind of reservation, one that prepares them to drink His cup, carry His heart, and share His mission. Their timing is off. But Jesus' invitation is right on time. And it reaches us too.

1. **What hopes or ambitions do you bring into your discipleship?**
 2. **Are you following Jesus for who He is—or for what you hope He'll give you?**
 3. **What does greatness mean to you, and where did that definition come from?**
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WEEK 3 - WEDNESDAY

CAN YOU DRINK THE CUP?

Mark 10:38–40 (NLT) *“But Jesus said to them, ‘You don’t know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?’ ‘Oh yes,’ they replied, ‘we are able!’”*

When James and John ask for the seats of honor, Jesus doesn't shame them—He simply tells them they don't yet understand what greatness costs. They imagine glory; Jesus is talking about formation.

To get at what Jesus means by “the cup,” I think about a season from early parenthood—one that many parents, caregivers, adult children, and spouses know all too well. When our daughter was born, sleep disappeared. Those long nights weren't dramatic; they were just relentless. The 1 a.m. cry... the 3 a.m. cry... the 5 a.m. cry. And every time, I faced the small but very real decision: stay in bed or get up again. And I know I'm not alone. Some of you have lived your own version of that rhythm, tending to a child with special needs, or getting up through the night to help an aging parent, or sitting at the bedside of a spouse whose illness won't respect the calendar. It's not glamorous. It's not Instagrammable. It's just love, wearing pajamas, carrying fatigue, doing what needs to be done.

When I look back on that season, I don't feel heroic. If anything, I felt stretched past my limits more times than I can count. But I can also see how those nights quietly softened me, how they shaped patience I didn't naturally have, how they taught me a version of love that isn't measured by energy levels or personal convenience.

And that, I think, is closer to what Jesus means by “drinking the cup.” The cup is not dramatic suffering. It's the slow, steady willingness to be poured out, when it costs you something. James and John say, “Yes, we can drink it,” because they're imagining a heroic moment. Jesus knows the cup comes in a thousand unremarkable surrenders, small, hidden choices that gradually shape us into people who can love like Him.

And perhaps His question to us sounds like this: Are you willing to let love form you, not in the moments everyone sees, but in the ones no one sees at all?

1. **What part of following Jesus feels costly for you right now?**
2. **Where do you sense God inviting you deeper into sacrifice?**
3. **How have you seen God use difficulty to form you in the past?**

WEEK 3 - THURSDAY

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

Mark 10:41–43 (NLT) “When the ten other disciples heard what James and John had asked, they were indignant. So Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people... But among you it will be different.’”

A few years ago, I was sitting in a meeting with a group of leaders, VPs, directors, deans, the kind of room where titles arrive before the people do. The conversation shifted to someone in the community, and one person said, “Oh, let me tell you a story about her.” She explained that years earlier, she hadn’t been to church regularly for a while. Life was full, jobs, marriage, bills, the usual pressures. But after she had her first child, she felt that nudge so many parents feel: Maybe we should give church a try again. So she went, tired, nervous, holding a baby carrier and a bit of hope. When she dropped her little one at the children’s ministry, she met a woman who knew nothing about her resume or accomplishments. She welcomed her, remembered her child’s name and made room for her. And slowly, that warmth drew her and her husband back into the life of the church, first occasionally, then regularly, then deeply. The woman who welcomed her had served in that ministry for over forty years. No spotlight. No platform. No microphone. Just faithful, joyful presence, week after week, year after year.

By the time people realized her impact, she had shaped the spiritual lives of thousands. They wanted to name a wing of the building after her. She politely refused. “I was just doing what needed to be done,” she said. She was the epitome of silent service and hidden greatness. When Jesus gathers His indignant disciples in Mark 10, this is exactly what He is addressing. The world gravitates toward hierarchy, titles, status, power, who’s on top, who gets credit, who gets the corner office or the microphone. But Jesus says, “Not so with you.” In His kingdom, greatness is measured in towels, not thrones. In unseen acts of love, not public displays of influence.

And if we take Jesus seriously, then the true spiritual leaders in any community may not be the ones with strategic plans or charismatic gifts. They may be the ones who change diapers in the nursery, sit with the lonely, show up early to stack chairs, cook meals for grieving families, or offer steady, unnoticed kindness. One day, when Jesus says, “Come sit beside Me,” we may be surprised, deeply surprised, by who takes those seats of honor.

1. Where do you see worldly power dynamics creeping into your faith community?
2. How do you respond internally when others receive recognition you hoped for?
3. What might it look like for your church, home, or friendships to be “different”?

WEEK 3 - FRIDAY

THE TOWEL OVER THE CROWN

Mark 10:43–45 (NLT) “Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant... For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

When Jesus redefines greatness for His disciples, He doesn't condemn the desire to lead, He simply redirects it. He turns leadership inside out, making servanthood the measure of true influence. Jesus is saying, in effect, “If you want to rise in My kingdom, learn to go low.” It's counterintuitive, but the longer you sit with it, the more it rings true, because most of the damage we see in families, workplaces, churches, and even nations comes from leaders who cling to power rather than offering themselves in service.

Robert Greenleaf, whose 1970 essay “The Servant as Leader” launched the modern servant-leadership movement, argued that the first responsibility of any leader is to ensure that the people around them “grow as persons... becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous” (Greenleaf, 1970). What was revolutionary in corporate America was simply Jesus' teaching in managerial clothing. And decades of organizational research have largely proven Greenleaf right, teams and communities flourish under leaders who serve.

Nelson Mandela is one of the clearest modern examples of that kind of leadership. Reflecting on how to lead in times of tension and transition, he famously said, “It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory... You take the front line when there is danger.” (Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994). He lived those words. After twenty-seven years in prison, he emerged not demanding repayment, but inviting reconciliation; not seeking personal power, but elevating others. He understood, deeply and personally, that true leadership is not about how brightly you shine, but how faithfully you lift.

And this is where Jesus' words land in the practical debris of our own lives. Servant leadership rarely looks glamorous. It looks like the friend who keeps checking on their aging parent. It looks like the volunteer who shows up early to set the room and stays late to clean it. It looks like the coworker who mentors quietly behind the scenes or the spouse who carries more than their fair share because the other is struggling. These are the people who hold communities together, not with fanfare, but with towels draped over their arms.

When Jesus says, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,” He isn't offering a metaphor. He's revealing the posture of His heart.

1. Who is one person you can serve today—quietly and without expecting anything back?
2. What prevents you from embracing servant leadership more fully?
3. Where might Jesus be inviting you to lay down your crown and pick up a towel?

WEEK 4 - MONDAY

THE DONKEY THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Mark 11:1–6 (NLT) “Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ‘Go into the village over there,’ he told them... ‘The Lord needs it and will return it soon.’ The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside the front door.”

There's a hotel in Monte Carlo where rooms cost more per night than most family vacations. When you arrive, your transportation speaks before you do. Porsche, not Prius. Bentley, not Toyota. In places like that, people read your worth by what you ride in.

It was no different in the ancient world. Rome understood the language of the parade. Generals and emperors entered cities on warhorses, surrounded by soldiers and spectacle. Their arrival shouted: Power is here. Fall in line. During Passover week in Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate rode in from Caesarea on a warhorse with cavalry, a deliberate show of force to remind the city who controlled it. And Jesus steps into that world with a deliberate choice, a donkey. A borrowed donkey, at that.

There's no fanfare or military escort. When Jesus says, "The Lord needs it," He's using royal language. Kings could requisition animals for official use. Jesus is claiming kingship, but redefining it in the same breath. He fulfills Zechariah's promise: "Your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey." (9:9) Jesus is not rejecting power; He's correcting it and proclaiming that his kingdom will not advance by coercion.

I once served with a respected leader in a room full of titles. When a major initiative launched, everyone expected her to take the lead. Instead, she quietly handed the opening remarks to a young, unknown staff member. "You take it," she said. There was no ego or power-play. She demonstrated quiet, rooted confidence.

Jesus' entrance is that same subversive strength. Quiet, unforced and unthreatened. A king arriving in a way that makes Rome's warhorse look insecure. The crowd doesn't understand what they are seeing. They shout "Hosanna, save us now!" expecting Him to overthrow Rome. They want the general on the warhorse. But Jesus rides toward a cross, because paradoxically, his victory won't come through the enemy's death, it will come through His own. Which parade do we trust—the warhorse or the donkey? The kingdom built on force, or the kingdom built on love? The story where power dominates, or the story where power kneels?

1. Where might Jesus be inviting you to choose humility over visibility?
2. What “war horse” do you instinctively reach for when Jesus is pointing toward a donkey?
3. How does Jesus’ quiet confidence redefine the way you think about leadership?

WEEK 4 - TUESDAY

THE KING WHO DISAPPOINTS OUR EXPECTATIONS

Mark 11:7–11 (NLT) “Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples.”

At this point in the story the crowd has rolled out a red carpet of cloaks and palm branches. They're shouting “Hosanna!” expecting Jesus to step into revolution. This is the moment they've

all been waiting on! And then Jesus enters the Temple, looks around... and leaves. No cleansing. No proclamation. Just quiet observation. It's the last thing anyone expected.

History gives us a scene that carries the same emotional whiplash. After the Revolutionary War, the entire world watched George Washington, an American legend. Nations assumed he would seize power. Many Americans expected him to accept some form of kingship, that would have been normal. His generals were ready. The nation was his to command. People waited for a triumphant leader to step into ultimate authority. But instead, in 1783, Washington walked into the Maryland State House, handed Congress his military commission, bowed, and went home to his farm. No coronation. No fanfare. Just restraint so shocking that King George III famously said, "If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world."

It wasn't what anyone expected, but it was deeply intentional. Jesus' quiet entry into the Temple carries that same kind of holy restraint. Jesus isn't hesitating, rather he's observing. We know this because Mark tells us He "looked around carefully at everything." Importantly this is before Jesus' famous episode when he overturns tables. Before that moment he pays attention, so we see Jesus demonstrating that before judgment occurs, there must be deep reflection, before action, clarity.

We struggle with that. We want Jesus to act immediately, decisively, loudly. We want Him to fix it now. But sometimes God's first move in our lives is to simply look around and to take in the truth of the situation we're in, to expose what's broken, to prepare the ground for what He's about to do next. The crowd expected a Messiah who would storm the Temple instead they got a Messiah who walked in, noticed, and walked back out. And that quiet, intentional pause was not the absence of power, it was the beginning of transformation.

1. **When has Jesus responded differently than you hoped?**
2. **How do you react when God pauses instead of moves?**
3. **What might Jesus be seeing in your life that you've overlooked?**

WEEK 4 - WEDNESDAY

THE TREE WITH PROMISE BUT NO LIFE

Mark 11:12–14 (NLT) *"He noticed a fig tree in full leaf a little way off... but there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. Then Jesus said to the tree, 'May no one ever eat your fruit again!'"*

I remember the night we landed in Rome—9:37 p.m., jet-lagged, starving, wandering the streets looking for anything open. We found a family-run restaurant that looked perfect. Warm lighting, friendly waiter with the classic silver mustache, the nonna in the back shouting instructions. It felt like we'd stumbled onto a movie set. The plates arrived quickly, beautifully garnished, picture-perfect pasta. But three bites in, my sister-in-law's face fell. "My food is off," she whispered. She was right. Everything looked incredible, but something underneath was spoiled. The garnish had covered the truth.

That's the fig tree Jesus encounters. And here's the detail most of us miss: In that region, fig trees produce pagim, early edible buds, before they produce full leaves. If a tree had leaves, it

should already have pagim. So when Jesus saw the leafy tree, it was essentially advertising fruit. Promising nourishment. Signaling abundance. But when He came close, there was nothing there, it was all appearance with no substance. Leaves without pagim. This story is not Jesus throwing a tantrum at a tree, it's a living parable. A prophetic sign about what He had just seen the day before in the Temple, activity, ritual, noise, structure... but very little spiritual nourishment. The temple was a system offering the garnish of religion without the fruit of love.

And this is where it gets uncomfortably close to home. We all have parts of our lives that "leaf out" beautifully, competence, image, busyness, curated spirituality. The outward signs of health show up long before the inward fruit has been cultivated. It's possible to look impressive from a distance and still be empty up close. The fig tree invites us to an honest inventory: Am I offering leaves or fruit? Do people walk away from me nourished, or hungry? Where am I adding garnish instead of growing pagim? And here's the grace: Jesus isn't condemning the desire for fruit. He's confronting the illusion of it. He isn't shaming the tree for not being perfect; He's exposing what prevents real growth. Sometimes God lovingly withers our illusions so something true can grow in their place. Authentic spiritual life always begins beneath the surface, roots, honesty, hidden work, slow growth. Pagim before leaves. Reality before appearance. Not performance. Not garnish. Fruit.

1. **Where in your life do you feel pressure to "look" fruitful instead of "be" fruitful?**
 2. **What inner work might Jesus be inviting you to return to?**
 3. **How can you cultivate depth rather than appearance?**
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WEEK 4 - THURSDAY

THE TABLES THAT STILL NEED TURNING

Mark 11:15–19 (NLT) "Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the people buying and selling animals for sacrifices... 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves."

There's a historic church on the East Coast with a front entrance that looks like something out of a postcard, broad marble steps, arched doors, stained glass catching the afternoon sun. It was the kind of entrance people used for wedding photos, the kind that made the building look dignified and established. Unfortunately those steps were beautiful, but they were also barriers. Anyone in a wheelchair, anyone with a walker, anyone pushing a stroller, anyone healing from surgery, all had to go around the back to the service entrance. The place for deliveries, not dignity. Eventually, the church decided to add a ramp to the front. And some people complained. "It ruins the look." "It doesn't fit the architecture." "It's not as beautiful anymore." The pastor responded with a line that has haunted me in the best way: "A building that keeps people out isn't beautiful. It's a barrier."

When Jesus steps into the Temple courts, He sees something similar. He sees an incredibly impressive structure with a proud history. It was a place meant to welcome the world into God's presence. But the reality on the ground was different, there was price-gouging and exploitative currency exchange. So, people trying to worship were getting squeezed financially. A place built

to welcome had become a place that pushed people away. And Jesus decides not to quietly correct it. He flips tables. He shuts down transactions. He quotes Isaiah to remind them who this place was always meant for: “A house of prayer for all nations.” In other words: Everyone gets a front door. No one goes around back.

Jesus’ anger here is not uncontrolled rage, it is protective love. It’s the love of someone who refuses to let barriers stand between God and God’s people. And if we’re honest, we all have “beautiful barriers.” Habits we defend because they’re familiar, ways of doing church that feel natural to us but confusing to newcomers. Attitudes or preferences we think are harmless but actually keep people at a distance. We’re vigilant about these things at Crosswalk, it’s the reason we started. The Temple needed tables flipped, that church needed a ramp. Because Jesus is still clearing space, still making room, still turning over whatever keeps people out.

1. **What barriers—intentional or not—might you create for others seeking God?**
 2. **Where might Jesus be overturning tables in your life so someone else can draw closer?**
 3. **How might you join Jesus in making faith accessible to the overlooked?**
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WEEK 4 - FRIDAY

THE ROOT WORK OF PRAYER

Mark 11:20–25 (NLT) “The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it had withered from the roots.”

If you sit with this passage long enough, one phrase rises to the surface: from the roots. Mark could have said the tree died. He could have said it withered. But he adds that small detail, roots first. Underground first. The hidden place first.

Years ago a counselor told me, “People keep pruning their behavior, but nothing really changes because the roots are unchanged.” That line has become something of a pastoral compass for me. We want new fruit without new roots. We want growth without the slow work of tending the soil. We want resurrection without surrender.

James K.A. Smith puts it this way: “You are what you love, because you live toward what you want” (*Desiring the Kingdom*, 2009). And our wants, our loves, are formed down deep, in the subterranean places of habit and desire. What you practice in the quiet eventually becomes who you are in public.

This is why Jesus links prayer and forgiveness here. Because unforgiveness is root rot, it poisons the soil of the soul. And prayer, real prayer, is the practice that opens that soil again. It softens what’s compacted. It loosens what’s hardened. It pulls us out of our grudges, resentments, and rehearsed narratives. It makes room for God to breathe again. It’s funny, the disciples want to talk about miracles, about mountains moving, about dramatic displays of power but Jesus wants to talk about grudges. He knows the real work of transformation begins where no one sees it. Underground. In the roots.

The irony is that we often want God to change the visible parts of our lives, the fruit, the outcomes, the circumstances, without inviting Him to tend the unseen places. But Scripture is consistent: renewal always starts below the surface. In the daily habits. In the quiet surrenders. In the prayers we pray when no one is watching. Before God grows fruit, He tends roots.

1. What root issues—fear, resentment, bitterness—need God’s healing?
 2. How are your prayers shaped by unresolved anger or disappointment?
 3. What would it look like to release someone so your heart has room to breathe?
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WEEK 5 - MONDAY

THE WEIGHT OF SAYING YES

Mark 14:32–35 (NLT) *“He took Peter, James, and John, and he became deeply troubled and distressed. He told them, ‘My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death.’”*

Before Jesus ever carries the cross, He carries the weight of choice. Gethsemane is where the real surrender happens, not on Golgotha, but here, in a quiet garden, late at night, when no one is watching.

I think about every woman who says yes to pregnancy and childbirth. That yes is beautiful, but it isn’t naïve. It’s a yes that knows pain is coming. Yes, modern medicine helps. Yes, I’ve never personally experienced labor. But I was in the room with my wife, and all I could think was, every woman who goes through this carries a strength I can’t pretend to understand. It is a courageous, embodied surrender, a yes to joy that includes a yes to suffering. A yes that knows the cost and chooses love anyway. That’s Gethsemane.

Someone once told me, “The hardest yes is the one you give when you know exactly what it will cost.” Jesus is standing in that kind of yes, a fully aware, fully human, fully vulnerable yes. Mark tells us Jesus is “deeply troubled and distressed.” The Greek carries the sense of being overwhelmed, swallowed up by sorrow. The kind of anguish that makes your knees go weak. And the name of the place matters: Gethsemane, “olive press.” This is where olives are crushed, squeezed until oil runs out. Jesus is being pressed from every side: the weight of betrayal, the loneliness of leadership, the shadow of the cross coming closer. And what flows out of Him under pressure is love that refuses to run. Jesus had a choice, he could have walked away, he could have chosen safety or silence or self-preservation. But He doesn’t. Jesus says yes, knowing the pain, knowing the cost, knowing what the next hours would hold. In the garden, Jesus shows us that surrender isn’t weakness but courage. It’s love with its eyes wide open. And for many of us, that’s exactly where discipleship begins, not at the spectacular moments of faith, but in the quiet, internal decision to say, “Father, I’m willing,” even when we’re terrified.

1. What costly “yes” is Jesus inviting you to consider?
2. Where do you feel pressed, and what is emerging through that pressure?
3. How does Jesus’ vulnerability shape your own honesty before God?

WEEK 5 - TUESDAY

THE PRAYER WE KNOW BUT RESIST

Mark 14:35–36 (NLT) *“‘Abba, Father,’ he cried out, ‘everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.’”*

This is the prayer most of us know by heart but struggle to pray with honesty: *“Your will be done.”* Sometimes praying can feel like gravel in the mouth, hard and uncomfortable. It’s easy to pray for God to change circumstances. It’s much harder to pray for God to change us in the middle of them.

A dad once told me about a long, exhausting season with his teenage son. They kept missing each other, every conversation turning into an argument, every attempt at connection dissolving into silence. His daily prayer was simple: “God, fix him. Make him open up. Help him communicate.” But one night, while praying that same prayer for the hundredth time, he sensed a different invitation: “Would you let Me adjust your expectations first?” He realized he wasn’t praying for relationship, he was praying for his son to become easier. So, he shifted the prayer. Instead of “God, change him,” he prayed, “God, grow me. Make me patient. Make me safe to talk to. Make me someone who listens without rushing to fix.” Nothing dramatic happened overnight. The son didn’t suddenly become expressive or articulate. But something in him changed. He slowed down. He softened. And in that new posture, his son eventually opened up. The circumstance didn’t transform first, the parent did.

This is the move Jesus makes in Gethsemane. He names His desire honestly, “Take this cup away”, but He doesn’t stop there. He keeps praying until His heart is aligned with the Father’s will, not His own. Three times He returns to the same prayer, not because God is hard of hearing, but because surrender is rarely a single moment. It’s a rhythm and a return to the same desire to the same pain. And sometimes God changes the situation, sometimes God changes the timing, but often God begins by changing us.

And that transformation usually happens in the quiet space where we finally pray, “Not my will, but Yours.”

1. Where do you feel the tension between your will and God’s?
2. What would “Your will be done” look like today—not theoretically, but practically?
3. How might repeated prayer open you to God’s strength?

WEEK 5 - WEDNESDAY

THE FAILURE JESUS DOESN’T HOLD AGAINST YOU

Mark 14:37–42 (NLT) *“Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. He said to Peter, ‘Couldn’t you watch with me even one hour?’”*

There’s something painfully honest about this moment in Gethsemane. Jesus doesn’t ask His disciples to cast out demons or preach a sermon or perform some heroic act. He asks them to stay awake and be present with Him, but they can’t do it. They’re utterly exhausted by the events which have been taking place. Their eyes are heavy, and their strength is thin. They aren’t trying to abandon Him, they simply reach the edge of their humanity and Jesus sees that. He names it without humiliating them: “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” That line is less a rebuke and more a diagnosis. It’s Jesus saying, “I know you love me... and I also know you’re limited.” And this is where the good news breaks through: Jesus doesn’t withdraw from them in their moment of failure. He doesn’t choose new disciples, he doesn’t shame them for not being who they think they should be. He simply keeps going, and He carries them with Him.

Eugene Peterson once wrote,

“The Christian life is going to God. And going to God is a long obedience in the same direction.” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, 2000 ed., p. 17) That sentence has steadied me more times than I can count. Because “long obedience” doesn’t mean polished obedience. It doesn’t mean unbroken strength or perfect attention; instead it means showing up again tomorrow, even if today you fell asleep in the garden. It means trusting that Jesus keeps watch even when we nod off.

One of the most freeing realizations in the spiritual life is that Jesus doesn’t build His kingdom with people who never fail, He builds it with people who wake up, rub their eyes, and try again. People who love Him, even when they can’t always keep up with Him. People who discover that grace fills the gap between who they want to be and who they are right now. People like you and me. The gospel is not that we are unwaveringly faithful, the gospel is that Jesus is faithful even when we’re tired, distracted, and human.

1. **Where have you felt your own limits recently—and how might Jesus meet you in them?**
 2. **Who needs patience from you in their exhaustion or weakness?**
 3. **How does Jesus’ gentleness invite gentleness toward yourself?**
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WEEK 5 - THURSDAY

THE KISS THAT BREAKS THE HEART

Mark 14:43–46 (NLT) *“As Jesus was speaking, Judas appeared... Judas had given them a prearranged signal: ‘You will know which one to arrest when I greet him with a kiss.’”*

A kiss is never just a kiss, not in Scripture, not in the ancient world, and honestly not in ours. In the first century, a kiss could communicate deep loyalty. Disciples kissed rabbis as a sign of

respect. Friends kissed one another as a mark of covenant faithfulness. Families kissed as a way of saying, we belong to one another. A kiss was loaded with meaning, affection, honor, devotion. Even today, we know the power of this small gesture. A kiss can communicate commitment... or apathy. Intimacy... or distance. A kiss can start a marriage, or end one.

So when Judas chooses a kiss as his signal, the tragedy isn't just the betrayal. It's the distortion of a symbol meant for love. Judas doesn't stab Jesus in the back; he embraces Him in the front, he uses the gesture of belonging to mark Jesus as the one to be taken, and suddenly, a symbol of loyalty becomes a weapon of betrayal. Mark wants us to feel the weight of it, to sit with the uncomfortable truth that betrayal rarely comes from enemies. It comes from people close enough to kiss you. People who know your rhythms, your voice, your vulnerabilities. If I was Jesus shoes I would have likely reacted with bitterness, but Jesus doesn't recoil. He doesn't step back, he receives the kiss and lets Himself be handed over by someone He called friend. This is the shock of the moment: Jesus is not caught off guard. He stands there, letting Judas do what Judas has chosen, not because He is powerless but because He has already surrendered to the Father's will.

There's something in this story for every person who has ever felt blindsided by someone they trusted. A friend who walked away. A partner who changed the rules. A family member who wounded you with familiarity. Betrayal hurts most when it comes dressed as affection. But Jesus carries that kind of pain too, he knows what it's like to be kissed and cut in the same moment. And He walks forward anyway because Gethsemane teaches us that Jesus doesn't just bear the sin of the world, he bears the heartbreak of human relationships. Your heartbreak is not foreign to Him.

1. **Where have you experienced betrayal or disappointment, and how is Jesus meeting you there?**
 2. **What does responding with love—but also wisdom—look like in painful relationships?**
 3. **How can you forgive without minimizing the wound?**
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WEEK 5 - FRIDAY

THE LOVE THAT OUTLIVES OUR FAILURE

Mark 14:47–50 (NLT) *“Then all his disciples deserted him and ran away.”*

There's a moment in the Gospels that can feel almost too human to sit with: the disciples, every last one, run. Not just Judas with his kiss, not just Peter with his sword, but all of them. The whole community Jesus poured Himself into slinks away into the dark. If you've ever loved people who didn't stay, Jesus knows that ache. The Gospels don't dress it up or soften the edges. They don't shame the disciples or excuse them, they simply tell the truth: fear made the choice, and they ran. They weren't malicious, they were overwhelmed, fragile, unprepared for the weight of that night.

Russian novelist Dostoevsky once observed a truth that feels tailor-made for this scene. *“Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.”* Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880. Notice what he's saying, it's easy to imagine ourselves courageous

in theory, heroic in dreams. But it's harder to stay present when the garden fills with torches and soldiers. The disciples loved Jesus in their dreams, but in action, in the crush of fear, they faltered. It was the worst days of their lives, their dreams turned into nightmares. And still, Jesus walks forward, he doesn't call them back for one more rallying speech, he doesn't replace them. He doesn't withdraw His affection or revise His mission. He walks the road they cannot walk, not to shame them, but to save them.

That's the wonder woven into this moment: Jesus' love doesn't end where our courage ends, his faithfulness isn't undone by our failure. Every disciple who runs that night is gathered again, Peter the denier. Thomas the doubter. The sons of Zebedee who vanished into the shadows. Even those who fade from the narrative find themselves caught up in resurrection grace, because failure is never the end of the story when Jesus is the one writing it! If you've run, out of fear, exhaustion, confusion, this passage isn't your indictment. It's your invitation. The One you ran from is the One who comes back for you.

The question isn't, "Did you fail?" We all do. The question is, "Will you let His love find you again?"

1. **Where do you feel tempted to run from Jesus out of fear or shame?**
 2. **How has Jesus stayed faithful to you in seasons when you were struggling?**
 3. **Who in your life needs the kind of grace that stays, even when others scatter?**
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WEEK 6 - MONDAY

THE DARKNESS THAT COVERS EVERYTHING

Mark 15:33-34 (NLT) *"At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'"*

Darkness at noon is wrong in a way that makes your skin crawl. The sun should be at its brightest, shadows should be short and sharp, the world should be flooded with light. But instead, for three hours, the sky goes dark while Jesus hangs between heaven and earth.

This isn't poetic language or metaphor. Mark is telling us the cosmos itself reacted to what was happening on that hill. Creation was witnessing its Creator die, and the lights went out.

I remember sitting with a woman in Seattle whose husband had died suddenly. We were in her living room at two in the afternoon, one of those rare spring days when the sun finally breaks through after months of the gray pallor of winter and drizzle that doesn't end. The kind of day that feels precious in the Pacific Northwest precisely because it's so rare. Birds singing outside, light streaming through the windows, the world suddenly bright and alive. And she looked at me and said, "Why is it still bright outside? Doesn't the world know what just happened?" She wanted the weather to match the grief, wanted the sky to acknowledge the rupture in her life. And for three hours on a Friday afternoon two thousand years ago, that's exactly what happened.

The darkness at noon tells us that what's happening on the cross isn't just a human tragedy or political execution. This is cosmic. This is the moment when all the brokenness of the world, every act of violence and betrayal, every wound and every sin, gets placed on one man's shoulders. And the weight of it drives Him into a darkness so complete that even the sun refuses to watch.

But then Jesus cries out, and the words He chooses matter. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" These aren't words of despair invented in the moment, they're the opening line of Psalm 22, a prayer every faithful Jew would have known by heart. It's a psalm that begins in anguish but ends in vindication and praise. Jesus is praying Scripture in His darkest hour, clinging to the words His people have prayed for generations when they felt forsaken.

And here's the scandal of it all: Jesus knows what it feels like to be abandoned by God. The One who has existed in perfect communion with the Father from before time began experiences separation. The One who told His disciples He and the Father are one feels the crushing weight of distance. Not because God actually abandoned Him, but because Jesus took on Himself every human experience of God-forsakenness, every moment when we've cried out and heard only silence, every prayer that seemed to bounce off the ceiling.

This is the beautiful upset at its most brutal: the King who saves us by experiencing the very abandonment we deserve. The God who rescues us by entering into the worst thing we could ever feel.

1. **Where have you felt abandoned by God?**
 2. **How does it change things to know Jesus felt that abandonment too?**
 3. **What might it mean that Jesus prays Scripture in His darkest moment?**
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WEEK 6 - TUESDAY

THE BREATH THAT CHANGES HISTORY

Mark 15:37-39 (NLT) *"Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. When the Roman officer who stood facing him saw how he had died, he exclaimed, 'This man truly was the Son of God!'"*

Death is usually quiet. The movies get this wrong, people don't die with dramatic speeches or perfectly timed final words. Most of the time, death is a gradual fading, breath getting shallower, voice getting softer, until finally there's just silence.

But Jesus doesn't fade. Mark tells us He uttered "another loud cry" and then breathed His last. Even in death, Jesus is loud, declaring something with His final breath that the centurion standing there somehow understands.

I think about what that Roman soldier saw that day. He's seen hundreds of crucifixions, this is just another shift for him, another group of criminals getting what Rome says they deserve. Crucifixion was designed to be humiliating and prolonged, victims typically took days to die, their strength slowly ebbing until they could no longer pull themselves up to breathe. But this man is

different. This man has been on the cross for six hours, and when He dies, it's with a cry of strength, not weakness. It's a declaration, not a whimper.

And the centurion, a pagan Roman soldier who's never read the Torah or heard the prophets, looks at how Jesus died and says out loud what the disciples have been too afraid to say: "This man truly was the Son of God."

Think about that. The confession Peter made back in Mark 8, the one Jesus told him not to share, is now being declared by the last person anyone expected. Not a disciple. Not a believer. Not even a Jew. A Roman executioner looks at death and sees divinity.

But that's not all that happens in that moment. At the exact instant Jesus breathes His last, the curtain in the Temple tears in two from top to bottom. This isn't a small curtain, it's a massive tapestry that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple, the place where God's presence was said to dwell, the place only the high priest could enter once a year. And it tears. From top to bottom, meaning God ripped it, not human hands.

For centuries, that curtain said "stay back" and "not yet" and "you're not holy enough." It was a necessary barrier between holy God and sinful humanity. But when Jesus dies, the barrier comes down. The separation ends. The distance is bridged. What the Temple couldn't do, what the sacrifices couldn't accomplish, what human effort could never achieve, Jesus does with His last breath.

Access to God is no longer mediated by priests or curtains or rituals. The way is open. Not because we've become holy enough, but because Jesus has made Himself the bridge. The centurion gets it immediately. This isn't a defeated criminal or failed revolutionary. This is the Son of God opening a door that's been locked since Eden.

1. **When have you felt unworthy to approach God?**
 2. **How does the torn curtain change your understanding of access to God?**
 3. **What does it mean that a Roman soldier confesses Jesus first?**
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WEEK 6 - WEDNESDAY

THE WOMEN WHO STAYED

Mark 15:42-47 (NLT) *"This all happened on Friday, the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath. As evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea took a risk and went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body... Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph were watching and saw where his body was laid."*

Here's something you might have missed in the chaos of the crucifixion: when everyone else scattered, when the disciples went underground and Peter was nursing his shame and the crowds went home, the women stayed. They stood at the cross. They watched Him die. And then they followed His body to the tomb. Mark is careful to name them: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Salome. These weren't casual observers or distant followers. These were women who had traveled with Jesus from Galilee, who had supported His ministry

with their own resources, who had listened to His teaching and believed His message. And when belief became costly, when association with Jesus could get you killed, they stayed visible.

Joseph of Arimathea shows up in this story like an unexpected grace. He's a member of the Sanhedrin, the very council that condemned Jesus, but Mark tells us he was "waiting for the Kingdom of God." He wasn't fully in, but he wasn't fully out either. And in this moment, when it costs him everything, his reputation, his standing, his safety, he goes to Pilate and asks for the body. This is dangerous. Under Roman law, crucified criminals were left on display as warnings. Their bodies were typically thrown into mass graves or left for wild animals. By asking for Jesus' body, Joseph is publicly identifying himself as a follower of a failed Messiah. He's painting a target on his own back. But he does it anyway, because sometimes love requires us to step out of the shadows.

A friend told me about their sister who sat with her brother as he died of AIDS in 1987, when the epidemic was at its peak and fear was everywhere. Their parents wouldn't come. Some of their siblings wouldn't visit. The church they grew up in had made it clear that this disease was judgment, that people who had AIDS deserved what they got. But Sarah showed up. She held his hand. She read to him. She stayed through the end and made sure he had a funeral with dignity. Years later, she said, "I couldn't do theology in that moment. I could only do love."

That's what these women do. That's what Joseph does. They can't fix what happened. They can't reverse the crucifixion or explain the tragedy. But they can stay. They can witness. They can wrap a body with care and lay it in a tomb with honor. They can show up when showing up is all that's left to do.

And here's the thing, when everyone else is managing their reputations or protecting their safety or trying to figure out what comes next, these marginal people, women who couldn't testify in court and a secret sympathizer, become the faithful ones. They're the ones who bridge Friday to Sunday. They're the ones who keep vigil in the dark. They're the ones who will be first to discover that death didn't get the last word.

1. **Where are you tempted to distance yourself from costly loyalty?**
 2. **Who in your life needs someone to simply stay present?**
 3. **How might "small" acts of faithfulness matter more than we realize?**
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WEEK 6 - THURSDAY

THE WOMEN WHO WOULDN'T STOP

Mark 16:1-5 (NLT) *"Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus' body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb... As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked."*

Grief has a strange way of narrowing your world down to the next small task. You can't think about next month or next year, you can barely think about tomorrow. But you can think about

this one thing, this small act of care that needs doing. For these women, that task was anointing Jesus' body. Never mind that the sun hasn't risen yet. Never mind that there's a massive stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. Never mind that they have no plan for moving it and no real hope of getting inside. They just know someone needs to do this last tender thing for the man they loved, so they show up with their spices and their grief and their stubborn devotion.

On the way to the tomb, they're asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone?" This is a practical problem without an obvious solution. Tomb stones in that era weren't doors you could knock on, they were massive circular stones that rolled in grooved tracks. Moving one required several strong men. But these women are going anyway, trusting that somehow they'll figure it out when they get there.

My wife Cass is like this. Give her a problem that seems impossible, and instead of getting paralyzed by the size of it, she'll start with the first small step. When we were moving to California and the logistics felt overwhelming, packing, hiring movers, finding housing, new schools, new jobs, I was making spreadsheets and backup plans. She just started putting books in boxes. "We can't do everything at once," she'd say, "but we can do this right now."

That's these women. They can't bring Jesus back. They can't undo Friday. But they can bring spices. They can show up at dawn. They can figure out the stone when they get there. And when they arrive, they discover the stone has already been rolled away. Not by them. Not because of their planning. But because God was already at work while they were walking through the dark.

They enter the tomb and see a young man in white, and Mark tells us they were shocked. Of course they were shocked. They came expecting death and decay. They came prepared to anoint a corpse. Instead they find an empty tomb and a messenger who's about to tell them something their grief can't yet process.

But here's what matters: they showed up. They didn't wait until they had all the answers or a foolproof plan. They didn't let the size of the stone or the impossibility of the situation keep them away. They just kept moving forward with the small faithfulness they could offer, trusting that somehow it would be enough. And it turns out, showing up is always enough, because God meets us in the moving forward. The miracles we need don't usually happen when we're standing still, trying to figure everything out. They happen when we take the next faithful step and discover that grace has gone ahead of us, rolling away the stones we thought were immovable.

- 1. What "stone" feels too big for you to move right now?**
- 2. Where is God inviting you to take the next small step anyway?**
- 3. How have you seen faithfulness met with unexpected grace?**

WEEK 6 - FRIDAY

THE MESSAGE THAT REWRITES EVERYTHING

Mark 16:6-8 (NLT) *"The angel said, 'Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.' The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened."*

This is where Mark's Gospel ends, at least in the earliest manuscripts we have. No appearances of the risen Jesus. No touching of wounds. No breakfast on the beach. Just an empty tomb, a messenger, and women running away in fear and silence.

For centuries, readers found this ending so unsatisfying that scribes added other endings, trying to tie up the loose threads and give us the resurrection appearances we expect. But Mark knows exactly what he's doing. He's leaving the tomb empty and the story unfinished because he wants us to see that the resurrection isn't the end of the story, it's the beginning of ours.

The angel's message is carefully crafted: "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." Present tense for the crucifixion, because that's what the women are focused on, the dead Jesus they came to anoint. But then: "He isn't here! He is risen!" Perfect tense, meaning an action completed in the past with ongoing results. Jesus rose and is still risen. Death happened, but death is over.

"Go tell his disciples," the angel says, and then adds two words that must have hit like grace: "including Peter." Peter, who denied Jesus three times. Peter, who swore he'd die before abandoning Jesus and then ran the moment things got dangerous. Peter, who's probably drowning in shame and regret, wondering if he's lost his place in the movement. The angel makes sure Peter knows he's specifically included in this message.

Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, where it all started, where He first called them, where they learned to follow before they learned to fail. The resurrection isn't asking them to forget what happened or pretend Friday didn't hurt. It's inviting them back to the beginning, to the place of calling, to start again with the same Jesus and the same mission but now with a deeper understanding of what it costs and what it means.

And then Mark tells us the women fled, trembling and bewildered, saying nothing to anyone. This is the most human response imaginable. They came expecting death and found life. They came to grieve and encountered mystery. Their categories are broken. Their assumptions are shattered. They're not ready to be resurrection witnesses, they're still trying to process what resurrection even means.

But here's the scandal: Mark's Gospel ends with their silence, but we're reading it, which means someone eventually spoke. These women who ran in fear found their voice. These disciples who scattered and denied and failed made it all the way to Galilee and met the risen Jesus and became the foundation of a movement that's still rolling across the world two thousand years later.

Mark ends his Gospel in the middle of the story because the story isn't over. The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen. And now it's our turn to figure out what that means, to carry this beautiful upset into our own Galilees, to live as people who've seen death defeated and separation ended.

The resurrection doesn't just tell us that Jesus is alive. It tells us that failure isn't final, that shame doesn't have to be permanent, that the worst thing is never the last thing. It tells us that God specializes in new beginnings and second chances and rolling away stones that seemed permanent.

Mark leaves us with an empty tomb and an invitation, the same invitation those first followers received: Go to Galilee. Go to where you started. Go to where Jesus first called you. He's already there, waiting for you, ready to begin again.

So where is your Galilee? Where is Jesus calling you to return? What's the first faithful step?

The tomb is empty. The King is risen. The beautiful upset has won.

Now it's your move.

- 1. Where do you need to return to your "Galilee"—the place of your first calling?**
 - 2. What keeps you from believing that resurrection is possible in your life?**
 - 3. How is Jesus already going ahead of you, even now?**
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